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## “NOT A VINTAGE YEAR”

John Harris

**R**obert Adam, born 1728, died 1792, and so up for canonisation in 1992. Bob the Roman, Bob the Scot, Bob the household name, known to all decorators and antique dealers as Bob of the Adam Style. We never hear of Wyatt chimneypieces or Chambers chairs. Our Bob has become the trash-can for anything neo-Classical. Just as everyone went cock-a-hoop over Wren in 1923, so has 1992 been Bob's year. He deserves it, but alas it has been a poor vintage.

Naturally, the year has been dominated by our friends on the other side of Hadrian's Wall, determined to do right for their famous son, maybe as famous as Bob the Bruce, and certainly more comprehensible. However, we might observe that like that other, and inferior, expatriate Scottish architect, Colin Campbell, the great and enduring works are in England.

London has always been the focal point of Adam studies, beginning with Swarbrick in 1915. In 1917 A. T. Bolton became Curator of the Soane Museum and within five years had produced his two magisterial volumes. Then, apart from a few minor articles, there occurs a hiatus until Lees-Milne's *Age of Adam* in 1947, a perceptive book like so many of its author's chosen subjects, prophetic of fashion. What really acted as a catalyst were two books: in 1953 Summerson's lucid *Architecture in Britain* and in 1954 Colvin's great *Biographical Dictionary*. Summerson offered an oddly partial view of Adam at the expense of Paine and Wyatt, and Colvin a great fission of documentary evidence. Out of these came two pioneering works: Fleming's *Robert Adam and his Circle* in 1962 and Eileen Harris's *The Furniture of Robert Adam* in 1963. In 1966 Stillman followed with an analysis of the interior decorative work.

After 1966 there is a lull, although *Country Life* was publishing articles on houses. It was then popular to anticipate Fleming's sequel to the early life, although that Scot was too canny not to understand that any consideration of the Great Works by which we mean the London houses and the country house installations, must be accompanied by a thorough study of the 9,000 drawings in Sir John Soane's Museum. Seventy years after the Spiers-Bolton listing there is still no proper catalogue. What condemnation of us architectural historians.

The lack of a catalogue has coloured all recent studies of Adam. Scholar after scholar falls into the trap of unwittingly misinterpreting the confusing drawings. Not least, one might mention the disappointment of the Ryckwerts' *Brothers Adam* in 1985. In order to tackle the Great Works long and deep concentration is necessary. For example, it can now be said that all previous studies of Osterley are obsolete, even the conclusion that it was originally a four tower house. This has been achieved by a demonic study of the drawings and the fabric. The Great Works are formidable. For example, Alistair Rowan, not at all unreasonably did not tackle them in his Slade Lectures, for lectures are not the vehicle for the concentration needed. Unfortunately, it is upon the Great Works in England that Adam's genius rests, not, dare I say it, upon the Castle Style so beloved by the Scots.

In 1992 there have been two beacons to light the way forward: one is Gervase Jackson-Stops' article on Syon in *Country Life* (April 16) re-evaluating Syon, especially in the light of 19th-century accounts, the other Eileen Harris's demolition job on the Lansdowne House Drawing Room in *Apollo* (August). These are a sort of partnership, for both turn everything upside down by an obsessive and concentrated enquiry. Perhaps only the *Survey of London* has

applied such concentration to a single building, but alas the mandate of the editors does not cover furnishings.

Naturally, this year has been Scots for the Scots, anxious to do right for their Bob. Nevertheless, it can be dangerous to identify Scotland too closely with Adam the Scottish expatriate, whose main chance was in London. There is a tendency to attempt to discover Adam's "movement" in his Scottish background (Hopeton etc). This is nonsense. The Adam practice in Scotland in the 1750s was deeply provincial, witness John Adam's old-fashioned design for the New Exchange, Edinburgh, 1753, in contrast, say, to James Paine's accomplished work in England of the same time. Even the much acclaimed Castle Style lacks something in the uneven handling of the details and, of course, an inability to bring the style indoors. But it is a serious response to the *genius loci*. Nevertheless, ultimately it is the Great Works in England that must be the measure to use, and not anything to do with Adam the Scot. Some use him as a tool for nationalist notions, but he must be judged against his English contemporaries: Paine, Taylor, Chambers, Wyatt, Stuart. Very often he does not pass the test!

For Scotland, Margaret Sanderson's *Robert Adam and Scotland* provides an excellent and readable general survey, tied together by correspondence and her "A Proper Respository", the *Building of the General Register House*, a concentrated study of one building. But on the whole, the rallies to the Scotch cry, "Up our Bob" are minor forays and peripheral concerns. All add something, but the solid statement is missing. At the RIAS there has been *Life, Death and Rebirth*; at the Scottish Record Office, *The Architecture of Robert Adam*; at the Collins Gallery, Glasgow, *Robert Adam's Glasgow*; at the NMRS a gathering of Adam drawings in the collection. There has even been an *Evening with the Adams* put on by the Saltire Society, where I am reliably informed, Bob was in wax effigy with a plentiful supply of pins for all to stick in.

These are the sort of events, and we must not forget the lectures, coincident with anniversaries, and we enjoy them all. However, there have been two Scottish works that deserve distinction. One is David King's *Complete Works of Robert and James Adam* that should be on everyone's shelf. However, it is not a comprehensive study of the works, but rather a canny observant field worker's tabulation of what exists or existed. It neither deals with unexecuted projects nor does it properly interpret the drawings. King is the perfect Adam (read train) spotter. Then there is a peripheral, but triumphant, enquiry into Adam's *Spalatro* by Iain Gordon Brown, in an exhibition in Edinburgh and London. We all know from Fleming about the beastliness of Bob to poor menial Clerisseau, with his utterly over-rated reputation. Lord Clyde would have called it Clerisseau-abuse. Alas the exhibition at Kenwood had to be reduced for lack of space, but it coincided with Julius Bryant's booklet *Robert Adam Architect*.

In comparison England's response has been muted and evasive of major issues, and it is all to do with well-intentioned but utterly misconceived plans to stage a huge Adam exhibition of the Washington *Treasure Houses* sort. That exhibition taught one a lesson in cost, and had the Adam exhibition been launched with a New York venue, its estimate of £1 million would have risen to £3 million. There is a natural tendency to celebrate an anniversary with an exhibition; but the truth is, the pressure to effect a large show is such that the individual contributors have little time for original research. Instead of asking a sponsor for £1 million pounds it would be better to spend half that sum on a proper catalogue of the drawings in the Soane by paying a top salary to a top historian. We cannot judge Adam in an exhibition, for his genius is for all to see in Osterley, Syon, Newby, Kedleston, Home House, Harewood, Mersham, Kenwood, Saltram, and on and on and on: all there today for us to experience. However, I still maintain that a selection of 140 drawings at the Royal Academy of Arts would take everyone's breath away.

There has not been much else in England. The AA symposium was feeble; and the

Georgian Group one dealt with him on a comparative basis revealing some interesting juxtapositions and a few missed opportunities. For example, we heard nothing of the evolving change in James Wyatt's interior style, from Adamitic to a disposition more Parisian, as if, like Chambers, he went to Paris "to observe and make proper remarks upon" new architecture. It would have helped to study the effect of Royal Academy students studying in Chambers' Gallic-tinctured rooms, for there is cause and effect with many students' work. Ivan Hall on Adam and Carr whetted our appetite for the book that must appear. Let not death or mortification strike Hall down as it has apparently struck so many claimants to the title of biographer to Carr of York. A little table-rapping for Mr Bohn may even tell us to whom all the portfolios of Carr's drawings were sold. The best paper of the Georgian's day was Giles Worsley's demonstration of Bob the pilferer of the "novelties" of others. The originality claimed by boastful Bob had long been practised by the Burlingtonians and not least James Paine.

I can imagine the frisson in the Georgian audience when Worsley rightly alluded to the nasty side of our Bob. Bob the self-publicist and shady property developer who got his cum-uppance with the Adelphi fiasco. It was that, not Chambers, which stopped Adam from being elected RA. I once likened Adam to a pansy decorator, of the John Fowler or Felix Harbord sort. Perhaps he was a pansy, but I think his unmarried state was the result of a personality problem. However, like dear Felix, he would no doubt have pocketed the labourers' wages if he knew he could get away with it. I do not care what my Scots friends think, there is no small spice of the spiv in our Bob.

There was not much else in England, although Steven Parissien's *The Adam Style* is an aesthetic version of the sort of encyclopaedic book produced by John Gloag. It covers all aspects of the style's manifestation through the design and decoration of a building; but it advances us no more on our Bob. That advance was shown by Francis Russell in his revelations about the Luton Hoo drawings (*Country Life*, January 16) discovered in Lord Bute's collection. It is hoped that these will feature as one of the Heinz-sponsored, London-Pittsburgh exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts.

So in this disappointing vintage year (like 1977), the Great Works have not been attended to, except for Syon and Osterley. Although this reviewer is as guilty as any, the celebrations for our Bob have not shown much originality, although a lecture on the Adam Revival in Edinburgh explored a little known subject. We might have expected something on the Continental influence of Adam, for the *Works in Architecture* were bi-lingual. Russia, Germany and France need trawling. There was Heinrich Christoph Jussow, who was in England in 1784-87 and clearly examined Adam's castle style drawings and works, and at the Löwenburg at Kassel produced an Adam castle as early as 1796, the first(?) totally asymmetrical medieval castle plan in Europe, and with Gothic interiors to boot; or there might be a telling study of Adam's lady patrons, their response to our "Felix Harbord", and then there is a need for a comparative study of Adam's decoration, with Dance, Chambers, Holland, the Wyatts, and the younger Soane: how they developed out of the Adamitic formula, and evolved towards what we must now recognize as a Regency style much affected by French taste. When Holland was designing Carlton House Adam was still producing tired standard interiors that had remained unchanged for 30 years. I will let others review the year 2028!